

Article published Oct 10, 2005

State provides funds for Wilder renovations

BRATTLEBORO — With the help of a \$200,000 state grant announced Friday, a local land trust has finished raising funds to renovate a four-story downtown building that was destroyed late last year in a fire.

The Brattleboro Area Community Land Trust hopes to begin work on the Wilder Block on Main Street in Brattleboro later this year after the organization raised more than \$1.5 million through local fund-raising and a series of state and federal grants.

A \$200,000 community development block grant announced by Gov. James Douglas Friday was the final piece of the economic puzzle.

"We're hopeful that we'll be signing the construction contracts about one year after the building burned down," said Land Trust Executive Director Connie Snow. "Projects like this don't usually fall into place so quickly, but this was something that people just gravitated toward."

A lit cigarette forgotten by a sleeping tenant in the building, burned down the top two floors of the Wilder Block on Dec. 4, 2004. The fire that followed for several hours shut down Main Street and caused heavy water damage on the first two floors.

Several businesses and 10 tenants were left homeless after the flames engulfed the building.

Town officials vowed to rebuild the building once known as the welcoming gateway to Brattleboro and the Land Trust soon stepped in to buy and renovate the building. Most of the businesses and all the tenants were quickly found new homes during a dramatic community outpouring that teamed the town up with area businesses and nonprofit groups.

Snow said crews essentially rebuilt the top two floors earlier this year to ensure it would be safe during the winter. She hopes the building will reopen as a combination of commercial and studio spaces along with eight affordable housing units next summer.

The project should go out to bid at the end of this month, she added.

"Everyone wants to see this building return," she said.

Other contributions to the Wilder restoration fund include a \$400,000 federal grant secured by Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., \$70,000 from the Preservation Trust of Vermont, a \$180,000 loan from the state and the sale of numerous tax credits by the Land Trust.

Snow said the renovated 1875-era building will have one more apartment than it had originally and will include a sprinkler system and an elevator, both also new features.